



Catherine E. Pugh
Mayor

COMMISSION FOR HISTORICAL & ARCHITECTURAL PRESERVATION

Tom Liebel, Chairman

STAFF REPORT



Thomas J. Stosur
Director

August 14, 2018

REQUEST: Replace stair railings

ADDRESS: 115 & 117 E. Montgomery Street (Federal Hill Historic District)

PETITIONER(S): James Wilcox, Pastor Duke Fries, Roy McDonald, owners

STAFF: Walter W. Gallas, AICP

RECOMMENDATION: Disapproval

SITE/HISTORIC DISTRICT

General Area: The properties are located in the Federal Hill Historic District (*Image 1*). Situated on a street grid with street names retained from its original settlement, Federal Hill demonstrates distinctive characteristics of a significant place combining various architectural styles and workmanship well-preserved over the course of its long history. Federal Hill comprises about 24 city blocks just south of the Inner Harbor. At its northeast corner, Federal Hill Park rises steeply from Key Highway overlooking the downtown skyline. The neighborhood retains intact streets of largely residential properties reflecting the eras in which they were built and the economic status of their early residents. Early houses were built of wood with side gables, and the form continued in many early examples in Flemish bond brick construction with gabled roofs and dormers. Simple Greek Revival rowhouses are found throughout the district, along with many Italianate rowhouses, along with a few detached houses with small front gardens. Details include stained glass, bracketed cornices, and iron fencing. Commercial structures, some with ornate storefronts, along the two primary thoroughfares, Light Street and Charles Street, reflect a range of 19th and early 20th century styles. A number of churches and an adaptively re-used high school are examples of institutional buildings in the district.

Site Conditions

The existing properties are two-story masonry rowhouses with single dormers in a row of four dating to the 1840s (*Image 2*). The facades of both houses have likely been altered with the insertion of large windows at the first floors. 117 E. Montgomery has segmented arched masonry lintels over a large 15-over-15 window and six-panel door at the first floor approached by three marble steps with two simple metal stair railings. 115 E. Montgomery has flat splayed masonry lintels. It has a large, wide 1-over-1 window and contemporary single-pane door approached by three brownstone steps with a single simple stair railing (*Image 3*).

The block on which these houses stand, bounded by Light, Montgomery, William and Churchill Streets, appears in *Sachse & Co's 1869 Bird's Eye View of the City of Baltimore*

(Image 4). The 1890 Sanborn map shows these houses in the intact block, which remains relatively unchanged in the 1971 Sanborn map (Images 5 & 6).

BACKGROUND

This being in the recently designated Federal Hill local historic district, there are no records of prior activity regarding these properties in CHAP files. These properties were not CHAP tax credit projects.

PROPOSAL & APPLICATION OF GUIDELINES

The applicant proposes to replace the existing metal stair railings at 115 and 117 E. Montgomery Street with railings that replicate the railing design at 119 E. Montgomery Street (Image 7). The initial application also requested the installation of 18” high railings at the front garden edges and around the two street trees to replace the wire and plastic material currently in place, which staff agreed to approve pending review of the design. Therefore, the stair railing replacement is the only part of the application before the Commission.

Staff applied the following section of the *Baltimore City Historic Preservation Design Guidelines* in reviewing this proposal:

1.9.2 Exterior Steps and Railings

- Repair deteriorated or damaged historic steps or railings whenever possible.
- Only replace steps or railings that are deteriorated beyond repair.
- Retain the historic orientation of exterior steps.

Application of Guidelines

These three guidelines apply to the treatment of historic steps and railings and recommend their retention and repair. The stairs at 115 and 117 E. Montgomery were installed as part of major renovations to the buildings around the 1980s, according to the applicant, and so the issue here is not the retention or replacement of historic material. The steps at 117 E. Montgomery are newer materials and the brownstone steps at 115 E. Montgomery are original, according to the applicant. The railings proposed to be replicated are at 119 E. Montgomery Street and were installed in this time period as well. The railings and steps at 119 E. Montgomery are from a property in Otterbein, according to the present owner, and so are not original to the building.

- Use historic documentation, physical evidence (such as comparable examples in the neighborhood) or photographs to accurately replicate missing steps and railings.
- When in-kind replacement is not possible, a visually and physically compatible synthetic material may be used that replicates the size, form, shape, texture, and appearance of the historic material. Provide samples and product literature for approval.
- Where new railings must be installed on stairs that did not historically have a railing, the new railing design should be simple and in keeping with the historic character of the neighborhood.

Application of Guidelines

The applicant proposes to fabricate replicas of the stair railings at 119 E. Montgomery to install at 115 and 117 E. Montgomery for a number of reasons: “Several other houses on

the 100 E Montgomery block have the same style external railings that are similar to 119 E Montgomery... It is the aim of the owners to have all 3 houses look similar and part of a group... These improvements [would] deliver a more historically correct final result....”

One can find a range of stair railing styles in the 100 block of E. Montgomery Street, from the ornate style of 119 to the spare contemporary style of 108 E. Montgomery across the street—and everything in between. Some stairs have no railings at all (*Images 8-12*).

The applicant states that the houses in this proposal were built as a group of four circa 1840-42. This is consistent with the research of Mary Ellen Hayward, who has written extensively about the history and architecture of Baltimore housing. She calls these houses with single dormers “two-and-a-half-story houses,” built for the growing workforce attracted to the factories and shipyards along the harbor. “The greatest number of two-and-a-half-story houses in Federal Hill,” writes Hayward, “were built between 1835 and 1845, a development pattern that occurred in all areas of Baltimore.”¹ These were houses for the working class, built in a spare style that sometimes included Greek revival touches seen in the door and window lintels of 119 E. Montgomery with concentric circles carved into the end blocks. When the houses were built, the front stairs might have been wood, not stone, and there wouldn’t necessarily have been any stair railings.

The railings and steps at 119 E. Montgomery chosen by the applicant as the model for replacement railings at 117 and 115 E. Montgomery were installed during the 1980s and came from a house in Otterbein, according to the owner of 119. There is no other documentation about the railings that may have existed here or at the other two properties. In the absence of such documentation, in accordance with the guidelines, the replacement railings should be as simple as possible, and not present a false history.

NEIGHBORHOOD COMMENTS

The Federal Hill Architectural Review Committee recommends approval of the application.

ANALYSIS

CHAP staff finds that the application fails to make the case that the proposed style of replacement railings would have been installed at 115 and 117 E. Montgomery. In the absence of historic documentation, staff recommends the retention of the current railings.

RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends disapproval of the application.



Eric Holcomb
Director

¹ Mary Ellen Hayward, “Urban Vernacular Architecture in Nineteenth-Century Baltimore,” *Winterthur Portfolio* [Vol. 6], Spring 1981, 43.

MAP AND IMAGES

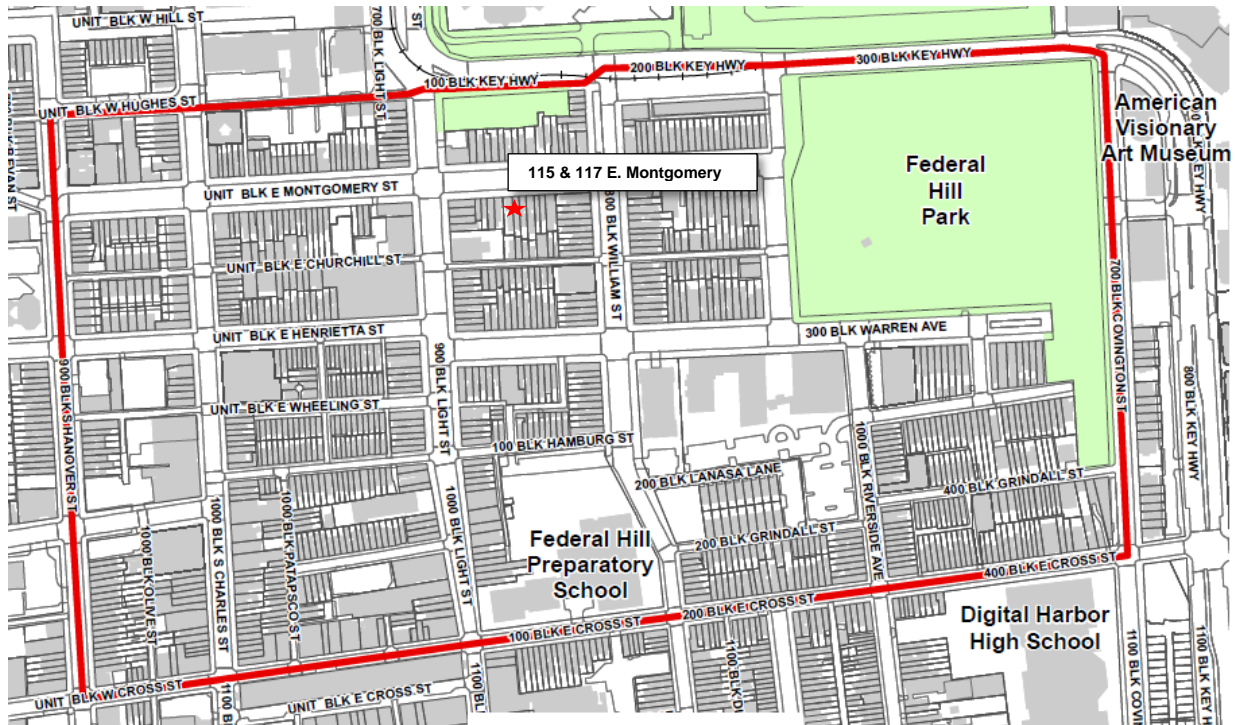


Image 1– 115 & 117 E. Montgomery Street in the Federal Hill Historic District.



Image 2: Aerial view of 115 & 117 E. Montgomery Street from north, December 2017



Image 3: 115, 117, 119 E. Montgomery, front elevations, July 2018

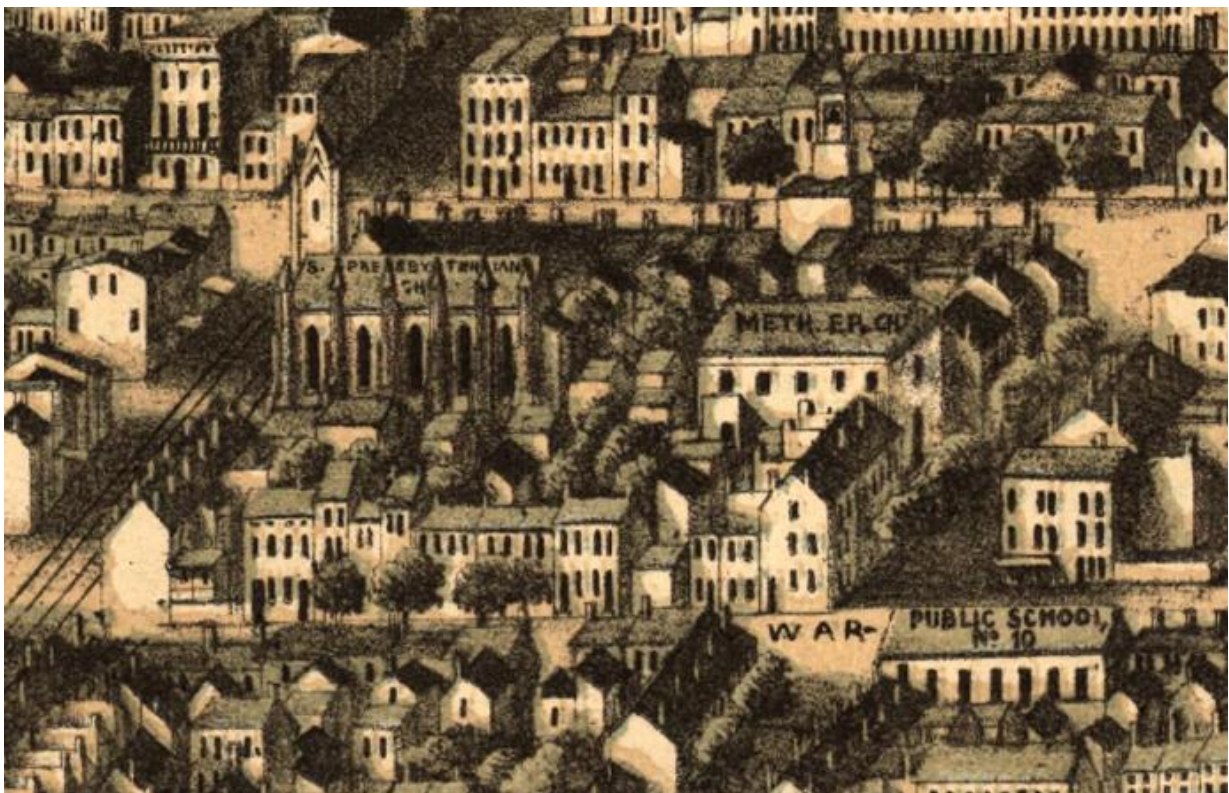


Image 4: Block bounded by Light Street, E. Montgomery Street, William Street, and Warren Street, E. Sachse & Co.'s Bird's Eye View of the City of Baltimore, 1869.

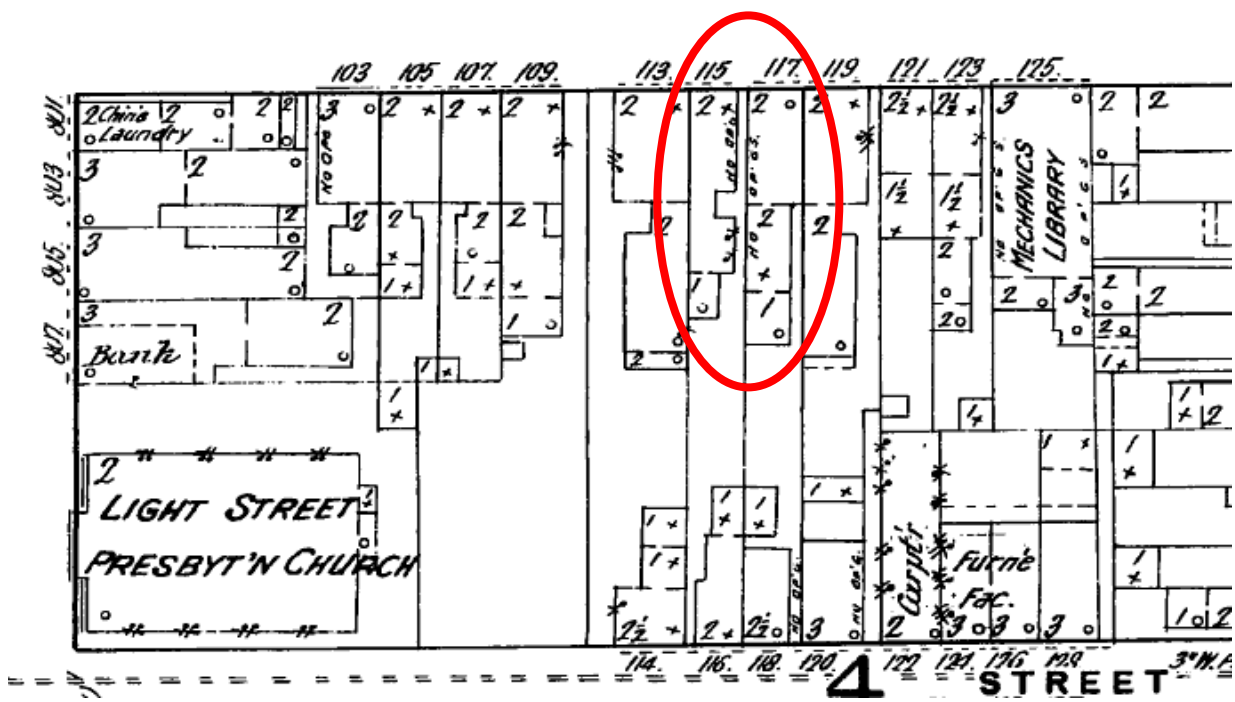


Image 5: 1890 Sanborn Map

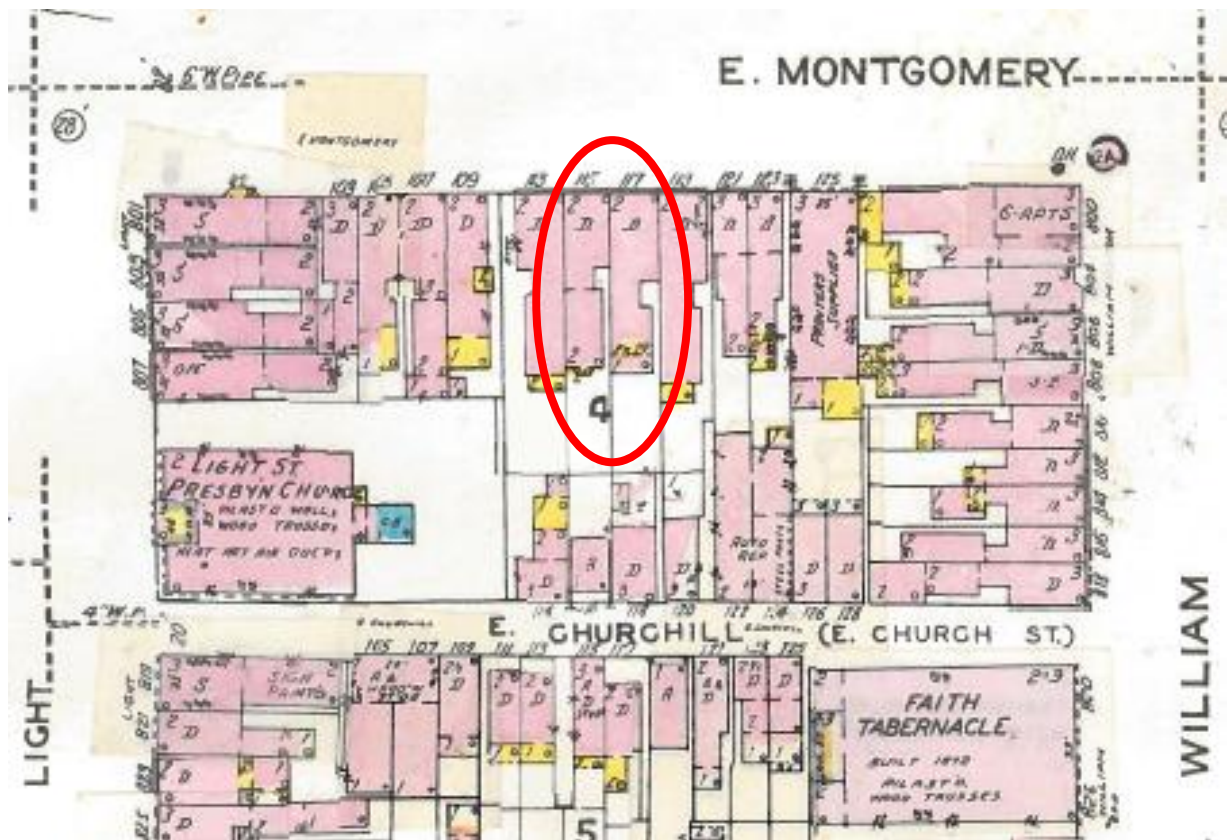


Image 6: 1971 Sanborn Map



Image 7: Railings at 119 E. Montgomery, detail, July 2018



Image 8: E. Montgomery Street stairs and railings, July 2018



Image 9: E. Montgomery Street stairs and railings, July 2018



Image 10: E. Montgomery Street stairs and railings, July 2018



Image 11: E. Montgomery Street stairs and railings, July 2018



Image 12: E. Montgomery Street stairs and railings, July 2018